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WASHINGTON
THE FOUNDER OF THE NATION.

AN ADDRESS READ BEFORE

THE RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY GEORGE MOULTON CARPENTER

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30 APRIL, 1880.

We celebrate to-day a double anniversary,—of the foundation of our organized national life and of the completed fame of the first man in the heroic age of our history. But the celebration could not be divided. The triumph of Washington and the founding of the nation are two aspects of the same event. The flag is the copy of his armorial device; the constitution is the inspiration of his self-contained and orderly intellect; the nation itself is the realization of his ambition and the expression of his character.

I thus venture to anticipate the judgment of future times. The first age of the republic is now finished. The two sections of the country are at last united in interest and will soon be united in sympathy and in action. The theory of the government is settled. It is true, indeed, that no person can yet undertake to write the history of the century in which these things have been accomplished. The history of an age must be written by comparison with the times which follow as well as those which precede. Results, in the action of nations, correspond with motives in the actions of men; and as the moral

character of individual conduct cannot be ascertained without a knowledge of the underlying motives, so the political character and value of a national policy cannot be determined until the results of that policy are known. The judicious historian of our day will therefore mostly confine himself to the chronicle of facts, and will make only the broadest generalizations and the most obvious inferences. It has been often said that the time is not yet come when it is possible to assign to Washington his just rank among historical personages. But I am persuaded that even now, whoever will carefully study the elements of his personal character, the situation and relations of the people of this country at the close of the revolution, the nature of the problem which lay before them as they addressed themselves to the task of settling the plan of their government, and finally the character and fabric of the government which they have established and maintained, will find himself drawn to the conclusion that the relation of Washington to our national affairs was different and superior in kind, as well as in degree, to that of any other public man of the time; that he has placed the stamp of his own character upon the framework of our government and upon the spirit and purpose of our people; and that the common voice of all men speaks but the language of sober truth when he is called "the father of his country."

I purpose briefly to outline some of the grounds for this conclusion.

In selecting the establishment of the government as the topic for consideration at this time, it has not been forgotten that our own state had no part in the

transactions which we commemorate. Our people had not yet accepted the constitution and were not represented in Congress or in the electoral college. It was at that time the policy of the Rhode Island people, as it has been their policy in the main ever since, to decline radical changes in public policy until they are approved on the most mature reflection. It is therefore not inappropriate for us to consider the motives and reasons which urged them at last to join the federal government.

In the beginning of the revolution, there was among the people of the colonies no spirit of national unity. They were urged to united action by the coincidence of their material interests. Civic freedom, and even personal liberty, were indeed threatened; but the chief purpose of the English government was to make these colonies tributary to the financial interest of the mother country. The whole course of their legislation betrays this purpose. The King's prerogative and his rights as lord paramount,—rights which had been acquired by feudal conquest on English soil,—were claimed to extend over the soil of proprietary colonies; and the legislative power of parliament, which in England has ever been held to derive validity only from the consent and participation of the Estates of the realm, was employed in this country to convert our free communities into provinces to be governed by arbitrary power. The acts for the government of the colonies, the acts regulating navigation and commerce, the various measures restrictive of manufactures and the useful arts, the acts for internal revenue and for taxes on imports,—all were artfully contrived to break the free

spirit of the people and at the same time to destroy the industries of the country separately and in detail, and thus, as each colony successively became the object of attack, to secure the envious indifference of all the others. These measures had doubtless to a large extent produced the desired result. The people were angry, doubtful, suspicious. The league of the colonies was formed from necessity and not from choice or sympathy. To combine these diverse and discordant interests, to unite these jealous communities and to hold them together in the face of invasion,—this task demanded a leader whose motives were higher and whose purposes were more far-reaching than those of the great mass of the people whom he was to lead. He must be a man, too, who could lead the leaders of the people. These were no common men. Samuel Adams, the very genius of revolution; John Adams, at once irascible and unsympathetic; Greene, the favorite of the army; Hamilton, the marvellous youth in whom statesmanship was not an acquirement but an instinct; Franklin, the father of all practical politicians,—these all, and others as eminent in ability and in character, recognized the pre-eminent fitness of Washington for the chief control of affairs. Called by the unanimous voice of Congress to the military command, his appointment inspired and united the army. He had no rivals but those who were traitors to their country. When the people were deliberating on the question whether they would approve the constitution, the general belief that he would be the person called on to execute the office of President was sufficient to reconcile them to the creation of an office against

which there was the violent suspicion that it could serve no use but to prepare the way for a monarchy. His address on laying down that office outlined the whole policy of the government from that day to the present, and his action on that occasion has permanently fixed the limit of the presidential term. His words and his example have a force greater than that of the organic law. The constitution may be changed; but no statesman will venture to contradict the maxims of the farewell address, and no President will exceed the official years of Washington.

In attempting to account for this phenomenon, two questions naturally suggest themselves. First, what was there in the character and position of Washington which made him acceptable as a leader; and secondly, what were the qualities of head and heart which enabled him to achieve so great success both as a military leader and as a civil administrator. Let us consider these two questions in their order.

First, what recommended him as the leader of the colonies? As we ask the question a majestic presence rises before us. Tall of stature, of great physical vigor, with large and powerful hands, a habit of bodily movement deliberate and not ungraceful, a countenance grave and commanding, pale, easily flushed with emotion, burned red but not bronzed by exposure to the rays of the sun, an eye clear, calm and cold,—such was the aspect of the man who rose in the Continental Congress to accept the difficult and hazardous post of commander-in-chief. “I declare,” said he, “with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with.” A country gentleman,

first a land surveyor and then a farmer, familiar with military affairs only as he had learned them in border warfare, a lover of dogs and horses and hunting, he had received only the imperfect education which was at the command of the well-to-do planter in his own neighborhood. He understood no language but English. But he was born for conflict as well as for command. When he first came under fire on the western frontier, he found, as he says, "something charming" in the whistling of bullets.

He was the leader of the southern society, in the richest and most populous of the southern states. Among the settlers of each of the colonies were some who ranked with the lesser gentry, and there early grew up a class of social and political leaders, less marked indeed but in close imitation of the leading class in England. There was a wide difference between the north and the south, which has continued to the present day and is only now passing away. Successful tradesmen were the social leaders in the north, while the rich planters controlled and gave the tone to the society of the south. The northern people were commercial, practical, steady in action, cool and observant, looking more to the end than to means; the southern people were agricultural, proud of their order, quick in quarrel and swift of action, fond of command. Such were the two forces out of which the nation grew. It was impossible that they should permanently unite except in the heat of battle. None can fully appreciate the weight and character of these two forces but those who stood upon the fatal ridge of Gettysburg and saw the chivalry of Virginia advance for their last

assault. The power of the south perished on that field,—but not until the center of the national defences was pierced, lest in after ages it should be said that the Union lines, on that day, were compact of more than mortal men.

The ruling class of the south in structure, in character and in temper, was more similar to the landed aristocracy in England, and the southern leaders were, consequently, the less willing to yield their claim to official precedence for the sake of the common good. It must therefore be a man of the south who could bind these two forces together for the revolutionary struggle. For the genius of the north was reserved a greater task and a greater triumph. In the fire of a greater revolution, we have seen these two forces melted into one. Henceforth the Nation has one character, one purpose, and one destiny.

What, in the second place, was the quality and the attitude of the mind of Washington whereby he was able to execute the great work to which he was called? To such questions as this, no complete answer can be expected. Greatness in men has a quality or a substance which evades analysis. It resides, perhaps, in a proportion too subtle for us to measure and in a combination too strong for us to break. Meanwhile we may observe the outward form, the signs and the manifestations of greatness.

Consider, then, in the structure of the mind of Washington, a genius for command, a talent for detail, an elevation of sentiment, an ambition to be useful.

The genius of command lies in the power to observe and to appreciate the mental attitude and purpose of the people, in the faculty to wait, and in the courage to grasp the opportunity. In the statesman, the politician and the demagogue it is all one. They differ in purpose, not in method. In the conduct of the revolutionary war this quality is especially observed. Naturally and without effort, Washington assumed the superior position. The Congress, the army, the people, all waited for his word, were inspired by his example, and reinforced his courage.

The talent for detail is the reverse side of genius, the test of accurate judgment and of enlightened and matured conclusions. It distinguishes the thinker from the theorist. With what wonderful pains did Washington investigate and direct the methods of military equipment and practice, the forms of financial procedure, the mutual relations of the executive and legislative functions, the subtleties of international law and the mysteries of diplomacy, the dress of officers and the etiquette of the republican court. It has been said, in supposed derogation from his merit, that much of this work was done for him by others. This is the highest testimony to his capacity for affairs. He is no common person whose researches are aided by Alexander Hamilton and whose phraseology is corrected by James Madison.

In elevation of sentiment, in sincerity of purpose, he has set the example for the whole world. He is, thus far, the standard of excellence for public men. Of the beginning of his public career he says, "I had no view of acquisition but that of honor by serving

faithfully my King and country." In discoursing on the highest forms of civic virtue, an acute and learned Frenchman thus illustrates his subject. "That," he says, "during a career of twenty years one should show that political sagacity, military heroism, the management of the most important affairs, a crushing weight of responsibility, were in no way inconsistent with public and private morality; that one should be under temptation to put an end to anarchy by taking possession of power, yet should refuse to do so; that one should use an army only for the maintenance of the laws, never in defiance of them; and, far from attempting to excite its natural discontent, should silence all complaints for the sake of the public good,—all this is such an extraordinary fact in history, that we should not have believed it possible, had not Washington lived to prove it by accomplishing it."

He had an ambition to rule for the good of the people, as strong as the ambition which has urged other rulers to their own aggrandizement. The ordinary marks of ambition are wanting in his conduct, partly because in him the sentiment was so strong and overmastering as to transcend the forms of expression which are adequate for common men. It was never necessary for him to strive for position. He was conscious of his own eminence and conscious that the first place belonged to him. When, as a country lad, he joined the staff of the gorgeous Braddock, he wrote to his brother, "I am treated with freedom, not inconsistent with respect, by the General and his family."

Consider, next, the manner in which the intellect so constituted applied itself to the solution of the

momentous question which then lay before the American people. The liberty which had been so hardly won must be preserved against foreign and domestic attack, discordant states must be united for a common end, a Nation must be constructed. The future fame of Washington depended upon the manner in which his great and controlling influence was brought to bear in the popular discussions which followed, and out of which grew the Constitution. Had he decided wrongly at this point, he would be known in history as the partisan leader of a useless revolution.

Two theories of civil society were presented for adoption, and they early divided the people of these states into two political parties which, with certain transformations and changes of name, continue to the present day. On the basis of these two theories, there were proposed two corresponding forms of government for the Union. The permanence of the Nation has been secured by the fact that both these great parties have from the beginning intended, by different methods, to reach the same result,—to preserve at once the liberty of the people and the integrity of the government. The peculiar felicity of the Nation has been that, in the practical determination of all great questions of policy, the Federal theory has invariably prevailed and that it is now finally established as the governing principle upon which the national growth and development shall hereafter proceed.

The two theories of government rest upon fundamentally different beliefs as to the nature and conditions of personal liberty. Perfect freedom, in

one view, consists in the absence of external restraint; according to the other view, it consists in the perfect development of the power which each man has within himself to control his external actions according to the principles of right and justice. In applying these principles to the social organism, therefore, the Democratic idea is that laws are an infringement upon liberty, and are hence an evil necessary to be endured for the preservation of external order but properly to be confined within the narrowest possible limits, and that, consequently, whenever any addition is made to the power of the government it must be made at the expense of a corresponding subtraction from the rights of the people; while the Federal, or Republican idea, on the other hand, is that the action of human beings cannot be free unless it be orderly, that law is not alone the external condition which makes liberty possible by repressing disorder, but is rather the external form which liberty itself assumes, and that complete liberty is not possible unless the government be irresistible.

It will be easily seen that parties so widely divided in doctrine will propose widely different plans for the establishment of a civil government. The system and theory of government which were approved and powerfully advocated by Washington were finally adopted and have been carried into effect. He foresaw what must be the inevitable result of the Democratic theory and repeatedly and impressively, in his public utterances, warned the people lest we should, to use his own words, "find by our own unhappy experience that there is a natural and necessary progression from the extreme

of anarchy to the extreme of tyranny, and that arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of liberty abused to licentiousness."

Against the system so proposed there has ever been maintained a consistent opposition. The Constitution was adopted only after the most strenuous efforts, under the pressure of impending financial distress and threatened financial dishonor and not so much from a popular feeling of approval as from the general recognition of the fact that the plan was favored by much the greater weight of instructed opinion. James Monroe writes to condole with Thomas Jefferson over the first great defeat of their newly organized party. "Be assured," says he, "Washington's influence carried this government."

Since the adoption of the Constitution the opposition has taken another form and the attempt has been made to establish a method of constitutional interpretation whereby the essential character of the government might be changed by confining the powers of the executive and of the legislature within the explicit meaning of the terms of the organic law. This theory of interpretation has never been maintained with logical consistency, and may perhaps be said to be now practically abandoned, although traces of it may yet be discerned and for sometime to come may be found in the opinions of some of our statesmen. It was of course, at once seen to be inadequate during the late rebellion of a portion of the slave states.

The success of the system of government, as it was originally established and interpreted, has thus amply proved the wisdom of the fathers of the

republic. There is no doubt that for the chief distinguishing features of that system we are largely indebted to the practical sagacity and sound judgment of Washington. Those who wish to be satisfied on this point must review the history of the time in the writings of the fathers. They are writings of which no American citizen should be ignorant.

It may, however, be worth while to advert to a few of those leading features of our government on whose importance Washington especially insisted.

In opposition to the example of all previously existing republics we have entrusted the active duties of government to a selected few. This is obviously the most unpopular provision which could be proposed, seeing that it was a plan as yet untried in any similar situation of human affairs; and, in practice, it has proved the strongest safeguard of our free institutions. The example of the French republic has abundantly shown the danger of submitting public questions to the direct vote of the whole people. "It is," says Bolzac, "an axiom written on the universe that there is no vigor except where there are few active principles."

We have, again, a central and predominant governmental power, strong enough, as has been proved, to repress any combination which might be formed against it, and armed with the judicial power to determine, without appeal, the limits of its own authority. We have the deliberately expressed opinion of Washington that if such a government could have been established at the beginning of the revolutionary struggle, he "could demonstrate to every mind open to conviction that, in less time and

with much less expense than has been incurred, the war might have been brought to the same happy conclusion."

Still further, the attributes of sovereignty reside in our national government, and not to any extent whatever in the separate states. Of this proposition there can be at the present time no reasonable controversy. Even under the Confederation, Washington spoke of the powers of Congress as the "sovereign authority," and pointedly warned the states that it was "only in our united character as an empire that our independence" was "acknowledged." "The states," said Madison, in the convention which formed the Constitution, "at present are only great corporations having the power of making by-laws not contradictory to the general confederation." But the form and language of the Constitution leave no room for doubt. The government is established by the people of the whole country in their collective capacity, and the states exercise their power of enacting municipal regulations only by virtue of the provisions of the Constitution. The two states of North Carolina and Rhode Island alone can claim to have exercised the powers of sovereignty at any single moment of their history, and these powers they abdicated when they joined the federal union.

No one can attentively read the writings of Washington without becoming convinced that such a government as this was deemed by him to be essential to the maintenance of our national life. This is perhaps the strongest proof of his genius for statecraft, since it brings before our minds the singular force and clearness with which he realized

the true situation and the real needs of his country.

His early life seems like a predestined preparation for his work. At nineteen he was an adjutant-general in Virginia. At twenty-one, commissioned to visit the French posts on the Ohio on a difficult and dangerous mission, he devotes the vacant hours to studying the military resources of the country, to making himself familiar with the temper and strength of the Indian tribes, to planning fortifications, and to laying out campaigns on the Canadian frontier. At twenty-two he was in command of the Virginian troops in the first skirmish of the French war, which ended in the capture of Quebec and thus laid the foundation of our republic. At twenty-three his friends and neighbors predicted his future eminence. On the occasion of a slight illness, due to exposure to the weather, he is admonished in a formal letter from an influential gentleman that he owes it to the public to preserve his health. The Rev. Samuel Davies, in a printed sermon entitled "Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of the good Soldier," uses these words,—“As a remarkable instance of this, I may point out to the public that heroic youth, Colonel Washington; whom I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto preserved in so signal a manner for some important service to his country.” Washington himself, when he is called to the command of the army, writes,—“It has been a kind of destiny that has thrown me upon this service.”

When the war closed, he instantly perceived the necessity of a vigorous national government and enforced his views in a most remarkable and convincing circular letter addressed to the governors of the



several states. The adoption of the Constitution will be, says he, "a new phenomenon in the political and moral world." He urged his countrymen to seize the opportunity "to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence."

Surely, as he penned these words, his sight was opened and a grand prophetic vision rose before his eyes. He saw the feeble colonies grown to a mighty nation; and he saw a people, for the first time in the history of the human race, stake their existence on the field of battle for the sake of those who were desolate and oppressed. Perhaps, too, he saw in his vision the image of the man who was to complete the work he had begun, the man of the people, called to bring deliverance to the captives, and crowned with martyrdom.

On the page which was touched by the lips of Washington, as he promised to preserve the Constitution, are written these words of the patriarch Jacob as he blessed the posterity of Joseph:—

The archers have sorely grieved him
And shot at him and persecuted him;
But his bow abode in strength
And the arms of his hands were made strong
By the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob
By the name of the shepherd, the stone of Israel.

These words bind together the age which was then passing away, and the nobler age which was beginning. They are a benediction on the old order, and a prophecy of the new.



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